

## **Volunteer firefighters call on Leggett to stop spending tax dollars on campaigning**

Montgomery County: Spending on ambulance fee effort is lawful, justified

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

Montgomery County's volunteer firefighters want County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) to stop spending taxpayers' money to fight a ballot question on ambulance fees.

During a press conference Tuesday, the volunteers called Leggett's spending inappropriate and questioned the legality of allowing paid firefighters to spend their work hours distributing information about a ballot question.

However, Leggett's office says the spending is lawful — and justified. Staff members say they are not campaigning, but rather educating county residents about ambulance fees.

County officials say they are unsure how much time and money have been spent on the issue.

Uniformed county firefighters have been distributing fliers at shopping malls and other locations during part of their work shifts. The fliers include information supporting ambulance fees, but do not mention that the issue is on the ballot.

A spokeswoman for Maryland Attorney General Douglas F. Gansler (D) told The Gazette that the activities are lawful.

But at least one County Council member disagrees.

"I think the issue of the county executive using county personnel to lobby for keeping ambulance fees is highly inappropriate and a misuse of county employees, regardless of the legality," said Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg. "I'm very concerned about the precedence it may set for the future."

The debate is centered on a ballot question facing voters in the general election Tuesday.

The volunteer firefighters fought to place a question on ambulance fees on the ballot. The question asks voters whether they support an ambulance billing system in the county. A "yes" vote allows for the ambulance fees, and a "no" vote is against them.

Both sides have political action committees backing them, and signs are visible throughout the county. Campaign finance reports for those PACs were not available Tuesday.

Neither has to file a report until Nov. 23, because the PACs did not form until earlier this month.

Paid county firefighters are using their off-duty time to hand out fliers at the polls — including one that was produced by Leggett's Office of Public Information. The effort is largely driven by the county firefighters' union.

Leggett's office contends they are educating residents about the fees and working to dispel misinformation put out by the volunteers.

Volunteer firefighters say the ambulance fees will deter residents from calling 911, drive up insurance rates and ultimately cost taxpayers — claims that Leggett's office denies.

At Aetna, which has about 1.1 million customers in the D.C. metropolitan region, which includes Montgomery County, officials say ambulance fees would not increase insurance rates.

Walt Cherniak, an Aetna spokesman, said the company does not consider ambulance fees when setting rates.

However, at CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield, spokesman Michael Sullivan said a county ambulance fee would drive up costs that might have to be passed on to customers.

"Mandates on coverage, such as new ambulance fees, add to the cost of care and are directly reflected in premium rates," he said. "New fees in Montgomery County would need to be accounted for, but since ambulance fees represent just a small portion of overall care costs the effect on premiums would, correspondingly, be limited."

America's Health Insurance Plans, a group representing the health care industry, agrees, according to spokesman Robert Zirkelbach.

"Anytime you add to the cost of providing care, that has a direct effect on the cost of health care coverage," he said.

In Fairfax County, Va., where an ambulance fee has been in place since 2005, county fire and rescue spokesman Dan Schmidt said calls for ambulance service have not decreased since the fees were put in place.

Revenue generated by the fees — about \$14 million annually — goes to the county's general fund, he said.

In Montgomery County, officials expect to bring in about \$14 million from the fees — \$1.1 million of which would be used to operate the program.

If voters reject the ambulance fee, the County Council will debate \$14 million in recommended budget cuts from Leggett. The cuts primarily target the fire and rescue service for reductions and would eliminate more than 100 firefighter positions and take 11 ambulances out of service.

Kent Mallalieu, a Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service battalion chief, said the losses would increase ambulance response times for the department from between five and seven minutes to about 40 minutes.

Eleven ambulances represents about one-third of the county's ambulances, he said.